The Principles of Pianoforte Practice

By

James Friskin

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

THE pianoforte teacher of to-day is more and more faced by the demand for exact analysis, in place of the mere experiment and guesswork which might have served him a generation ago. To this is undoubtedly due the increase in the number of pianists who are at least technically well equipped—an increase so great as to be even embarrassing. Thirty years ago it was comparatively rare to find a teacher who was prepared to give much real technical instruction. There would be an attempt to obtain independent action of the fingers and hand; with, as a universal specific, the advice to practice slowly. At that point the average stock of wisdom, where the mechanics of pianoforte playing were concerned, was likely to end. Anything further, which the student gained, would depend upon the inspiration derived from the musical personality of the teacher. Such a stimulus, when the teacher was an exceptional man, would be of enormous and lasting value; but the rank and file of those who claimed the right to teach could exert no influence, of a purely musical kind, great enough to excuse their disregard of precise technical directions.

It is not unfair to say that all but a few of the students of that day grew up with very little real understanding of the nature of their tools. As a result, those who had a certain instinctive aptitude and natural muscular freedom acquired "a good technique." Others might be more musical; nevertheless, in the absence of a sure command of their technical resources, their mode of expression remained labored and comparatively ineffective. Evidence of this may still be seen on many a concert platform, even in the performance of some artists with most remarkable powers of interpretation.

The pianist's muscular processes are now so much better understood that the would-be teacher must be ready not only, by verbal directions or actual illustration, to show what is wanted, but also to explain how to get it. There has already been a partial revolution in methods of instruction; and the kind of teacher, not uncommon in former days, who relied for the solution of every technical problem upon the admonition—"Go home and practice," is gradually disappearing.

As analysis of muscular conditions has done so much for the present-day pupil, it is suggested in the following pages that the mental processes which accompany his practice might with advantage receive equally careful examination.

It is true that the teacher's ignorance of muscular facts has often been the cause of the pupil's lack of success. It is equally true

that the most competent and conscientious teacher has to confess at times that the results of his efforts, as shown in perceptible progress on the part of the pupil, are disappointingly small. In seeking for the reason he may have to admit that the pupil possesses normal intelligence, practices four or five hours daily, is even "musical" above the average, and that, nevertheless, the amount of energy expended is out of all proportion to the actual achievement. If we assume a weekly lesson of one hour, we may reckon that most pupils spend from twenty to thirty times as long in working by themselves as they do under the supervision of a teacher. Given competence and clearness of statement on the part of the instructor, it is therefore reasonable to suppose that any shortcoming results from failure to carry out in practice what has been learned in theory at the lesson; and it is plainly of vital importance to instill from the beginning sound principles in this connection. The following article attempts to state some of these principles, failure to observe which, according to the experience of the writer, is the cause of a good deal of disappointment both to teacher and to pupil.

It is the pupil's mental attitude with which we are mainly concerned. Command over his tools is to some extent taken for granted. The desirability of any particular method or school of technique does not therefore come under discussion.

I

THE FUNCTION OF THE EAR

The Ear

No one can be long engaged in teaching music students without realizing that many of them—one might almost say, most—simply *do not hear* all the sounds they produce. It is obvious that, while this condition persists, an intelligent and convincing performance of a musical composition is impossible—as impossible (it has been suggested without much exaggeration) as it would be for a painter, who had first blindfolded himself, to produce a picture. Yet there are thousands of young pianists who are, unconsciously, in this exact situation. This amazing tone-deafness is shown both by the habitual playing of notes which are not indicated and by the complacent disregard of elementary accentual values. Even pupils of real musical intelligence often accept results which they would never tolerate in the performance of anyone but themselves.

Much of this trouble has its root in our generally unintelligent method of musical education. Until comparatively recently it was a nearly universal custom to introduce a child to the art of music by teaching him to read musical notation and to reproduce by means of the pianoforte what he read. Those with exceptional aptitude may have taken no harm from this; but in the average case the natural consequence was that the primarily essential appeal to the ear received much

less than its proper emphasis, and that the pupil's performance had no more vitality than would have had his recitation of a sentence in a language which he did not understand. His practice consequently became mere note-repetition, and had absolutely no musical result. It is not surprising that the subjection of children to daily torture of this kind caused many of them to loathe the very sight of a piano; what is really astonishing is that so many musical natures were able to survive.

Even when, in later years, it might be, the student went to some school where ear-training was systematically and intelligently taught, it was quite common to meet with cases where there was no apparent association of this training with the work in other branches. The early habit of playing without listening is too strong to be overcome merely by the practice, in an ear-training class, of chord and interval recognition, and of musical dictation.

It has to be insisted that *every musical phrase which is played should constitute an exercise in ear-training*—an exercise, in this case, not confined to the realization of pitch and time relations, but requiring the most minute regard for the interpretative demands of the work that is being studied.

II

CONCENTRATION—THE OBJECTIVE ATTITUDE OF MIND

Concentration

The first essential, if practice is to be really fruitful, is therefore *concentration*. However, the general exhortation to "concentrate" is not likely to carry the pupil very far, unless it is accompanied by something more detailed and explicit. How is this desirable power to be attained?

We have to admit, of course, that there are differences of natural capacity here, as everywhere else. Some fortunate people appear to have been born with the power of bringing their minds to bear at will upon any subject, to the exclusion of all that is irrelevant. It is probable that this might be furthered by the mental training to be obtained from a system like that of M. Jaques-Dalcroze: if such training were given to a young child, the subsequent practice of a musical instrument would be a much simpler matter than it generally is.

But the kind of discipline, that is suggested now, consists rather in the acquisition of, and insistence upon, a certain mental attitude towards the musical material to be dealt with. It is urged that even those whose original power of concentration is small may develop that power by means of this mental discipline as profitably as the body through physical exercise; and that they may acquire in this

way a measure of control that would otherwise be inconceivable.

To begin with, the student should regard his performance *objectively*. It must be his aim to put himself in the position of a listener. As has already been said, many players allow themselves to produce sounds that they would condemn at once if they heard them in the performance of another; what has to be achieved is the by no means easy feat of acting, at the same time, as player and audience.

This clearly involves the abandonment, to some extent, of the popular idea that the supreme artist is "carried away by the music" so as to produce his effects while in a sort of trance, or in a state of quasi-demoniac possession. It is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to give an exact account of the mental and emotional processes that have their part in a satisfying musical interpretation, but it is certain that neither in the case of the interpretative artist nor in that of the musical composer does the average untutored music-lover suspect what an important place is held by the element of sheer *mental labor*. The perfecting of an interpretation, as of a composition, demands rigid and constant self-criticism. In both there is creative work to be done—in the one case through imaginative sympathy, and in the other through actual thematic invention and command of structural technique—and the musician has to "get outside of himself" again and again to make sure that no self-deception is leading

him astray. To adapt the quotation, he must "hear himself as others hear him," and contemplate his performance with as calm a judgment as a painter might bring to the appraisal of a picture.

Those of opposite natural inclination can only acquire this habit of mind by much painful effort and constant self-reminder. At first the "scatter-brained" pupil will find it necessary to stop at fairly frequent intervals to make a kind of mental survey of his achievement, as the time during which continuous attention is possible for him will be comparatively brief. However, the persevering repetition of the attempt to concentrate, and steady guarding against the production of any sound that is not deliberately intended, will bring their reward.

This constant renewal of mental effort during practice is demanded also in the case of continued work (for example, in the preparation of a recital program) during several weeks on the same compositions. Here one must stimulate in oneself a never-failing freshness of outlook, and endeavor to bring to each day's practice the same alert attention and imagination that accompanied a first acquaintance with the music studied.

It may be remarked that there is implied not only a daily renewal of *mental* exertion, but also what may be described as a reassertion of *emotional* effort. This follows from the dual character, emotional and intellectual, of the process of musical expression.

It will easily be understood that work of this sort can be extremely exhausting and that the nervous strain that accompanies it is considerable. There can, however, be no comparison between the results obtained from real practice of this kind and from what ordinarily goes by that name.

III

DEFINITENESS OF AIM

Definiteness

From the beginning of his study, the player should endeavor to have a *definite aim*—definite tonally and rhythmically; *i. e.*, he must form a clear mental conception of the exact sound he wishes to make. The object of practice is to make the actual performance correspond to this ideal conception.

Here it may be appropriate to dispose of a fallacy that deceives many well-meaning students; it may be expressed, in their own words, as "learning the notes first and putting the expression in afterwards."

This procedure seems to them, not unnaturally, to ensure thoroughness, and there is an obvious attractiveness in a method which prescribes the solution of only one problem at a time. The mistake, however, is this: it has been forgotten that "expression" is fundamental; that, apart from expression, sounds have no significance; and that to accustom one's ears to tolerate mere re-production of the correct time-values, without the accompaniment of any vitalizing emotion, can never be anything but pernicious.

Teachers, who have been met, after a protest at the lifelessness of a pupil's performance, by the explanation, "But I haven't put the expression in yet," will bear witness to the disastrous effect of this kind of preparation. When the habit of listening to *mere notes* has

once been formed, it is sometimes almost hopeless to attempt to induce a perception of anything beyond; it is like trying by artificial respiration to restore a corpse to life. While there may be lavished upon the performance every refinement and subtlety of pianism, nothing can make the result a really sincere expression of feeling; and insincerity is, in art, the unpardonable sin.

The truth of course is that with the ideal interpreter the initial impulse should come, as it does with the composer, from the desire to move his hearers by the means of expression at his disposal, and that to this everything else should be subordinate and contributory.

It may seem paradoxical, after this emphasis upon the emotional element, to assert that the particular means, by which the emotional message is to be conveyed, must be worked out by a process of what is almost cold calculation. Nevertheless, the paradox represents the truth, and the highest artistic results can only be achieved by this very combination of calculation and spontaneity.

The realization, by the simultaneous operation of the artist's musical instinct and intellectual grasp, of the composer's meaning is the first step. To carry this conception to an audience with certainty, it is necessary to have complete control of every effect which forms a part of the conception; and this implies repeated practice, not only of mechanical difficulties, but also of the exact tonal coloring

which the player's judgment finally decides upon, and even of minute rhythmical subtleties like the application of "rubato."

This insistence upon, and repeated practice of, definite tonal and musical effects, so that the performance is "fixed" in advance down to the smallest detail, will not, however it may seem, make the ultimate interpretation sound less spontaneous. Here the player is in much the same position as is the actor, in whose case it is well known that the gestures and vocal inflections which seem to the audience most natural and spontaneous are often in reality those which have been most minutely studied and calculated.

The careful formation of the mental and muscular habits, which are associated with a consistent and artistic rendering of a musical composition, will give to the performer a sense of security which can be obtained in no other way, and which will allow him, if he possess real musical instinct, to yield all the more safely to the influence of "the mood of the moment." For we can now admit that, when the function of study has been fulfilled, there does enter the element of "inspiration"—something that is frequently the product of the sympathetic mutual relation of player and audience, and proceeds as much from the one as from the other. This mysterious factor comes to crown the labor that has been devoted to preparation, and is the supreme reward of the interpretative artist.

IV

ATTENTION—"HORIZONTAL" AND "PERPENDICULAR"

Attention

The pianoforte student has, even more than any other class of music student, to keep in mind the importance of listening not merely to each sound at the moment when it begins, but also *to the whole duration of the sound up to the moment at which it ceases.*

The special importance of this in pianoforte playing lies obviously in the characteristic limitation of the instrument—the fact that as soon as any sound has been produced the player retains only a partial control over it, and that it diminishes progressively in intensity. In consequence of this limitation one cannot produce a *legato* such as is to be obtained, for example, from the clarinet; and the effect which we know by that name, and which is such a necessary part of a pianist's equipment, is to a large extent an illusion.

In achieving this legitimate deception, and estimating the initial intensity of any note, two things must be remembered. (1) Both the length of the note and the accent (or lack of accent) which would naturally be due to its rhythmical position must be taken into account. (2) In passages of moderate speed it is frequently necessary to judge any note's initial tone by comparing it with the preceding note, not at the beginning, but *at the end of the latter's duration.*

As there is a wide range of difference in the sustaining power of various pianos, and of the various registers of the same instrument, the player has to be ready to make constant, and ultimately instinctive, adjustments of his treatment of the key, to comply with the demands of his ear.

While continuous attention throughout the whole duration of each sound is necessary, it is equally essential to listen to each individual note of a chord, or each individual "voice" of a contrapuntal passage, whether the said note or voice is to be prominent or subordinate. As has been suggested by Mr. Tobias Matthay, each chord should be heard, not as a vague "block" of sound, but with distinct realization of its separate components.

Even in simple octave passages, it is quite common to find pupils, who are not usually inattentive, failing to observe the occasional omission of either the upper or lower note. What generally happens in this case is that they feel the key with their finger, and take it for granted that it has been depressed far enough to produce the sound.

Further, the pianist's power to influence the "color" of a passage depends to a large extent on his being able to give tonal differences to various simultaneous sounds. The most obvious application of this, of course, is seen in giving prominence to a melody supported by a succession of chords. This, and the similar pianist's trick of emphasizing the upper or lower note of a melody played in

octaves, can easily degenerate into irritating mannerisms, when employed mechanically. These are, however, rudimentary instances of what is, when applied with true artistic judgment, a considerable factor in a pianist's success—his power to throw into relief any part of the musical texture. One of his first tasks, when he has got some general conception of the music, is to decide just what relations the various "strands" of this texture must bear to one another. In the case of repetitions of the same phrase, for example, it has to be settled whether the repetition should be an exact reproduction of the first statement or whether, by rearranging the tonal values, some fresh light should be thrown upon the passage.

This takes for granted that it is the business of the pianist, as interpreter, to go beyond the usually very general indications—*piano, mezzo-forte, fortissimo*, etc.—of the composer; these can hardly ever apply equally to all parts of the tonal fabric, from bass to treble, and it is of course unlikely that any but the most hopelessly unmusical *would* so apply them. What is insisted upon now is that the precise arrangement of tonal relations should not be left, when a finished performance is aimed at, to chance, or even to musical instinct; it should be deliberately studied in advance.

The general importance of both the above-mentioned kinds of musical attention—which might be conveniently referred to, in connec-

tion with musical notation, as "horizontal" and "perpendicular" attention—can hardly be overestimated. But they are above all to be striven for in the playing of contrapuntal music.

There are certain fugues of Bach (for instance, the fourth in Book I, and the ninth in Book II, of the "Well-tempered Clavichord") where the persistence of organ tone, rather than the evanescence of that of the piano, would seem appropriate. In rendering these on the piano the utmost nicety of judgment is called for; and the performer has to "listen through," in particular, whenever any note is sustained while a group of notes is simultaneously played in another voice, to make sure that the longer note is clearly heard throughout.

In addition to this "horizontal" attention, it goes without saying that it is just as necessary to listen "perpendicularly" and that to allot equal tone to all the voices of a fugue is almost always a musical impossibility.

Both in contrapuntal playing and in music of a more purely homophonic texture, it is a most useful practice to direct the attention occasionally, during study, with special concentration upon some voice, or even upon some mere figure of accompaniment, which is relatively unimportant. To the ordinary listener such features will pass quite unnoticed as part of the general impression. The experienced artist knows, however, that the

total effect can be ruined by any slovenliness or uncertainty in the execution of even minor details. Accordingly, he does not disdain to treat each of these in its turn with special care, without, of course, allowing himself to give to any subordinate voice more than its exactly appropriate tone.

V

SLOW PRACTICE—ITS USES AND DANGERS

Slow Practice

The necessity for slow practice has been so much insisted upon that its bare mention is almost sufficient. It is to be assumed that in working for technical perfection the student will commence at a speed which will allow his mind to control completely the exertions of the fingers and hand, as well as the condition of the arm. However, it is far from sufficient merely to give the direction, "Practice that passage slowly." Slow practice may even be a positive hindrance, if certain essential accompanying conditions are not fulfilled.

One supremely important principle should first be observed; *the muscular processes in slow practice must be the same as those employed in playing the passage at full speed.*

The common sense of this is so self-evident that it would be superfluous to emphasize it, if it were not so difficult to persuade the average pupil to bear it in mind. For example, the time spent by many students in practicing rapid finger-passages first of all at a slow tempo is largely wasted, through their failure to take care that their slow practice is really *finger-practice*, and is not accompanied by exertions of the hand or arm which at the correct tempo will be unavailable. (This naturally does not apply to those hand-exer-

tions which may properly, even at a high speed, assist in the performance of finger-passages of certain types.) Slow practice of "wrist-staccato" passages carries with it a similar danger; it may encourage exertions of the arm which will impede, if they do not make impossible, performance at the tempo that is ultimately called for.

Further, any "stiffness" in the condition of the arm is much less likely to be noticed by the player when the problem of agility is temporarily ignored: any passage can be played slowly—regardless of muscular condition. It is therefore a useful precaution, before commencing slow practice, to play a few notes at full speed. This will serve as a test, and will compel the realization of the necessary technical method.

Provided that the right type of technique is chosen, *the amount of movement*, whether of finger or hand, may safely (indeed preferably) be greater at a slow tempo than it can be when the passage in question is played up to time. Such increased movement has its use in assisting concentration, and contributes to "cleanness" in finger-work.

A less desirable practice is the common one of repeating, with an exaggerated *forte*, and at an extremely slow tempo, *any* finger-passage, no matter what tonal character is finally to be given to it. This should be employed sparingly. By its means the muscular development of the hand may be assisted, and its use cannot be ignored. The kind of tone

that is likely to be cultivated thereby is nevertheless too disagreeable to be often suitable or generally tolerated; its main characteristic might be described as a certain hard efficiency.

There is something to be said for the contrary practice of employing, in the preparation of rapid passage-work which is ultimately to be performed *forte*, a quite light touch. This, combined with a fairly quick tempo, is more likely to give a right idea of the essential muscular condition. When the right condition has become habitual, the extra weight required to produce the necessary tone can be applied fairly easily.

In general, it is desirable that even slow practice should be accompanied by attention to the tone-values which are intended in the finished performance.

The less naturally musical student may have to be warned against a second source of trouble, where slow practice is concerned—the adoption of an exaggeratedly slow tempo which makes impossible the realization of the musical phrase *as a whole*. In this case, what is mechanically helpful may at the same time be musically pernicious. It should always be possible to keep in mind the musical sense of what is being practiced, and to feel every accent and rhythmical climax as acutely as in actual performance. This is undoubtedly more difficult in proportion as the tempo becomes slower.

Certain kinds of rhythmical problems can

be solved more easily at a rapid speed than otherwise. This is notably so where one hand has to play, say, a group of three equal notes while the other plays one of four or five against it. Here the proper attitude of mind is one of *concentration upon the accent which immediately follows*, and the impulse toward that accent is much more easily realized when the movement is rapid.

Similarly, the main difficulty, which accompanies playing in a slow tempo generally, is that of the maintenance, in the minds of the audience, of the sense of *continuous movement* —commonly described as "sense of rhythm" —without which no coherent impression can be obtained. To accomplish this, the player himself must obviously have, over and above everything else, this never-failing grasp of the whole musical phrase, and it is often helpful to suggest it to the student by actually playing a slow melody much faster than it ought to go.

The same procedure assists in the practice of certain movements in the suites of Bach (*e. g.*, some of the Allemandes and Courantes), the musical sense of which it is hard for a present-day student to grasp. These "clear up" as soon as it can be shown that they are composed of phrases which can be felt as "tunes" just as truly as those of a Beethoven sonata. If these phrases are taken from their context and played with a temporary increase in speed, so that details are subordinated and the movement towards the phrase-climax is

emphasized, the pupil will afterwards find it easier to present them intelligently; and even in the musical language of two centuries ago he will discover a vehicle for the personal feeling that is always indispensable.

VI

THE PLACE OF TECHNICAL STUDIES

Technical Studies

In the past it was considered inevitable that a pupil, in order to develop his technique, should labor over a large quantity of the material provided by such writers as Czerny, Clementi, Cramer, Moscheles, etc.—to name some of the principal composers of what are known as "technical studies." Nowadays there is apparent a certain revulsion from this attitude. It is even suggested that such studies shall be dispensed with entirely, and that the necessary material can be found in compositions of real musical value, if these are wisely chosen.

The teacher whose first concern is the musical development of his pupil will naturally and rightly prefer the second of the two extreme points of view. Yet a moderate amount of technical drill, with the use of studies and exercises written solely for this special purpose, can properly take its place in a systematic scheme of instruction. Musical progress need not be interfered with if the purely technical work is directed intelligently; and at the same time the student will more quickly acquire control over the means by which he has to express himself. In a special technical study, any individual difficulty can be presented in a concentrated form, and can be conquered more readily; the repetition of the difficulty, with every possible variety of

key-board position, also ensures the attainment of the endurance which serves the pianist as a kind of muscular "reserve."

In order to obtain full benefit from the use of this class of material, it is of course first of all necessary that the student should clearly understand the exact purpose of any particular exercise. Whatever technical theory may command the allegiance of the teacher, it should be his object to impart it, as a logical and consistent whole, to his pupil, so that the latter can analyze any passage, in its pianistic aspect, and give an account of the method of its performance. Nothing can be much more unintelligent than the custom of beginning at one end of a book, say, of Czerny studies, and working through to the other end, with the touching faith that, in this way, a "good technique" will somehow be picked up, but with no consciousness of the end towards which any study is directed, and perhaps even with a muscular condition which renders impossible the complete mastery of the problem attacked.

Secondly, it may be suggested that the desirability of having a definite tonal and rhythmical aim, which has already been urged, should not here be overlooked. This, if it is constantly insisted upon, will do much to keep the practice of technical studies from becoming mere mechanical drudgery. They can, when rightly used, fulfill for the artist in tone the purpose which is served, for the painter, by his palette, so that the pianist has

finally, in a sense, a stock of "colors," from which he can deliberately choose, in working out his musical conceptions.

It is conceivable, of course, that studies of the kind which has just been discussed may be discarded entirely, where the pupil has sufficient initiative and intelligence to invent his own technical exercises. This should be encouraged by all possible means, even where the natural capacity is small. A beginning can be made with the suggestion by the teacher of a figure which illustrates some special type of difficulty, the pupil then being required to develop the given formula in sequences, and to work it out in different keys. Later, any difficult passage met with in the course of study may serve as a starting-point for the construction of similar exercises.

In this connection a word about practice claviers or "dumb key-boards" may not be irrelevant. In spite of the obvious humanitarian reasons which might tempt a teacher to recommend these contrivances, their use is simply to be condemned. Schumann's dictum—that one cannot learn to speak from the dumb—remains true. The object of all practice should be the association of particular sounds with their respective methods of key-treatment. The fatal defect of the practice clavier is that it forces the employment of muscular processes without any corresponding tonal result, and thus works against the very association which is the prime condition of really musical playing.

VII

CORRECTION OF FAULTS—THE INFLUENCE OF HABIT

Correction of Faults—Habit

In trying to penetrate the mind of the pupil whose natural ability to concentrate is small, the teacher is constantly obliged to recognize the enormous power of mere physical habit. This is specially noticeable when such a pupil attempts to correct faults that have crept in through misunderstanding or carelessness in his first study of a piece. These faults may be of various kinds; the wrong technical means may have been used, the musical content may not have been grasped, or the notes may simply have been misread. Whatever its nature, the mistake can only be remedied in one way. There must of course be sufficient insistence upon the correct playing of the passage; but this must also, at every repetition, be accompanied by concentration upon the mental and muscular exertions that are required in producing the intended effect.

Unless this fresh mental effort is constantly made, the hammering away at the physical process of tone-production can easily become almost automatic, and it will then be unsafe to count upon the displacement of the old and wrong habit by the new and correct one.

It would be equally unsafe to assume, as many appear to do, that mere *recognition* of a fault is equivalent to *correction*. To drive this point home, the teacher might suggest

that, where the wrong muscular action has been permitted, say, a hundred times in the original practice, an equal number of repetitions of the correct one will only suffice to restore a balance, and that then there must be added enough further practice really to establish the right habit. In this rough-and-ready psychology there is perhaps sufficient accuracy for the purpose; for students, whose mental powers are to begin with under proper control, and who can be trusted, after a mistake has been noted, to enforce the correction thoroughly, it will not be necessary.

At the same time, it has to be remembered that *association* has also a strong influence. After a passage has been corrected and repracticed, it should be carefully connected with its context. If this is not done there will be uncertainty in the performance of the work as a whole; the phrase preceding the passage which was at first practiced wrongly will then quite probably suggest the original fault instead of the subsequent correction.

VIII

MENTAL REALIZATION OF SOUND- AND TOUCH-IMPRESSIONS

Mental Realization

A completely controlled performance depends largely upon the power to do, *mentally*, what has also to be done *physically*. (This is the vital factor in playing confidently from memory).

The senses employed in mastering a composition are, in the order of their importance, those of hearing, touch, and sight. It is curious that the possibility of developing the mental counterparts of these physical senses has been recognized in the case of the first and third, but largely ignored in that of the second.

One may admit the possible usefulness of the visualization of the appearance of the printed page (of "seeing a picture of the notes," as students frequently put it), but this power is certainly the one which can be most easily dispensed with. The visualization of the key-board, and of the relative positions of the successive keys that have to be reached by the fingers, is perhaps a little more helpful, but its value is yet comparatively slight.

The development of the "mental ear" is, on the contrary, of supreme importance, and is rightly receiving, in musical education, more and more attention. A glance at a page of music type should convey to the musical sense an impression as distinct as that which reaches the intelligence from the reading of a

sentence in a familiar language. In relating this to pianoforte practice, the main thing to insist upon is the *completeness* and *definiteness* of the mental impression. It is not sufficient to realize mentally the general effect of the music; there should be a clear consciousness of the sound of the whole—melody, bass, and inner parts.

As the physical sense of hearing has a corresponding mental process which can be cultivated, it seems worth while to consider a similar development in connection with the sense of touch. Such a development is undoubtedly possible, and it has probably to some extent taken place with most pianists, whether they are aware of it or not.

With each sound which is "heard" mentally in "thinking through" a musical composition there should be associated a special consciousness of the finger which is to produce that sound. To "mental hearing" must be added "mental feeling." When this faculty has been thoroughly exercised the player will be able to attain, away from the key-board, and without making any actual movement, a consciousness, not merely of the finger which produces any particular sound, but also of that finger's relation to the pianoforte key. (For example there will be a difference in the mental impression, according to whether the key in question is a black or a white one.) So, finally, the mind will be able to conceive, in coördination, sound, finger-exertion, and key-board position.

This coördination is the more necessary, as these three factors show no kind of uniform correspondence. The various major thirds, for instance, which can be produced from the piano, while they sound alike to the ear, have actually ten different positions. (One or two of these, it is true, vary so slightly as to allow their differences to be ignored.) The most extreme case is found if we consider the two intervals (1) B–E sharp (augmented fourth) and (2) E sharp–B (diminished fifth). Here the possibility of confusion in performance, if complete coördination is absent, may be shown most clearly—for:

To the ear, (1) and (2) sound, except as to pitch, exactly alike.

To the eye, reading the notation (1) is *smaller* than (2).

To the fingers, dealing with the key-board (1) is *greater* than (2).

The pianist's problem might seem already sufficiently complicated, but there is yet another element which has to be taken into account. We have only considered, in discussing the relation of key-board position to ear and eye, *horizontal* distances. It is equally important to allow for the varying *perpendicular* distances which, in dealing with black and white keys, the finger has to traverse. A great part of the difficulty presented by an accurate performance of a piece like the familiar Capriccio in B minor, Opus 76, No. 2, of Brahms, lies just here. It has to be remembered that, in aiming the hand

for the production of the characteristic *staccato* which is maintained throughout, the level of the keys, as well as their sound, has constantly to be estimated. The mere recognition of this necessity is often all that is required to turn a "sloppy" performance into one that is clean and well controlled.

In striving for this coördination of ear, eye, and finger, it is perhaps worth while to suggest that the pedal should not, except when it cannot be avoided, or when the exigencies of a particular type of tone-production demand it, be allowed to usurp the function of the finger in producing *legato*. It is absolutely necessary to associate sound with key-contact, if the ear and finger are to work together with precision; and the habit of trusting vaguely to the pedal to sustain tone, while the finger has temporarily lost its relation to the process of musical expression, is one that is apt, especially with inexperienced students, to lead to laxity of both aural and tactual attention. The pedal has an important function of its own, which has to be considered separately; but this function should be conceived as something in addition to that of the finger, and the two should not be confused. Pedaling calls for a coöperation, of ear and foot, similar to that which we have discussed as existing between ear and finger.

IX

READING AT SIGHT

Reading at Sight

The coördination of eye, ear, and finger which has been discussed is specially demanded in reading at sight. This coördination, instead of being achieved gradually in the course of practice, has now to be instantaneous. The eye has to be trained to grasp musical phrases as it grasps sentences in reading a book. In pianoforte-playing there must follow a further process—immediate mental realization of the series and combinations of keys that will produce the required sounds, together with the fingers that are to play them. There must also be an instinctive assumption of the muscular attitude that will enable the player to reach and depress the keys most easily.

With many this kind of facility "comes naturally." Most of those whose original aptitude is small are inclined to believe that their failing can only to a very slight extent be overcome, but it is probable that even in their case much can be done by going straight to the root of the trouble and working to form the mental habit which must govern the physical act.

The supreme requirement, in reading at sight, is the maintenance of the rhythm, unbroken; this is decidedly more essential than even accuracy of notes. A sensitive listener will find that occasional slips and smudges are comparatively unimportant blemishes,

but he will be at once disturbed and have his total impression ruined by any interruption of the movement.

To convey to the hearer this sense of continuous movement it is necessary, as has already been stated, to grasp clearly the structure of the successive phrases. The logical procedure for any one who is attempting to improve in sight-reading would seem to be this—Let him take some composition which is technically well within his powers, and, without touching the keyboard, read through as much as he can *conceive as a whole* —whether it be a single phrase or a succession of phrases. Then, still without having recourse to an instrument, let him work mentally upon this section of the piece, settling the tempo, dynamic gradations, accents, etc., and associating with these the finger and keyboard positions.

Only when the mental impression has been made as complete as possible should actual performance be attempted, and then the passage should be played, however imperfectly as to notes, with firm insistence upon uninterrupted movement from beginning to end.

It will be noted that association of the visual impression with *both* the tactual and the aural sense is to be aimed at. Many of those who are reputed to read well at sight seem to have achieved only one half of this aim. That is to say, they readily associate the appearance of any note or group of notes with the corresponding pianoforte keys, but

do not at the same time form any conception of the sound that is to be produced. It is also quite possible that, with others, the visual impression may suggest the sound without any accompanying appeal to the sense of touch.

Both of these classes are from the pianist's point of view "mental defectives"; it may be said that the former is less musical, the latter less practically available. It should be possible for either to supply what is lacking—in the one case by "thinking sound" and laying the emphasis there, and in the other by insisting more particularly, during the preliminary mental practice which has been advocated, upon the connection between brain and finger-tip.

For those whose aural sense is weak, systematic ear-training is the natural remedy. To develop the tactual sense, the treatment must be analogous—the student must have the perseverance to go through a course of steady mental exercise which will comprise the association of all possible varieties of pianoforte key combination and succession with the corresponding fingers, attended by deliberate and conscious concentration on the accompanying touch-impressions.

Conclusion

If the suggested attitude towards practice is persisted in, purely mental activity should be substituted for much of the work usually done at the keyboard, and the element of

drudgery, which is so often regarded as an indispensable accompaniment of musical progress, should be completely eliminated. Moreover, there can probably be a considerable reduction of the time spent in practice. No student should find it essential, or even helpful, to sit at the piano, as has been the habit of many would-be pianists, for seven or eight hours of the day. It is indeed unlikely that any normal human being can, in the real sense of the word, *practice* for so long. He who attempts to do so may succeed in getting his fingers to move and in sounding the notes somehow, but it is hardly possible that his brain and senses should remain continuously active. To be sure, while technical habits are being formed, a considerable amount (perhaps three or four hours) of daily practice at the keyboard is inevitable, in order to acquire control over the muscles of finger, hand, and arm; when the technique is consolidated even this can in most cases be quite safely reduced.

Such feats as those of Hans von Bülow (of whom it is related that he would memorize a difficult composition in the train and play it the same evening at a concert) suggest the ideal possibility that, with a physical and mental organization in perfect working order, one could dispense with keyboard practice entirely. Bearing in mind the human limitations and weaknesses that hamper most of us, we had better regard this as a counsel of perfection and not attempt to put it into

operation. But our practice ought at least to be directed consciously and intelligently to a definite artistic end. That is within our power, and for a musician it is a modest aspiration. With less, none of us should be content.

NOTE.—The chapter on "Habit," reprinted by Messrs. Henry Holt and Company from "The Principles of Psychology," by William James, and also the chapter on "The Nature of Musical Attention" in Tobias Matthay's "Musical Interpretation," will be found useful in connection with the questions that have been discussed.

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